

THE MINOR PROPHETS.

VI. HABAKKUK.

THE name Habakkuk is explained by St. Jerome to mean "a wrestler," and by Luther "one who presses to the heart"; but it probably means "pressed earnestly to the heart." We know nothing of his history; but since his book ends with the words "To the chief musician on *my* stringed instruments," and as that magnificent poem was evidently meant to be chanted in the Temple, it has been supposed that he was a Levite. The fact that he is twice spoken of as "the prophet" shows that he held an assured position, as that title is only formally given to Haggai and Zechariah. There are many legends about him, one of which is preserved in the Apocrypha (*Bel and the Dragon*, 33-39).

It is there related that he was one day preparing pottage for his reapers, when an angel told him to convey the meal to Daniel in the lions' den at Babylon. He replied that he had never seen Babylon, and did not know where the lions' den was. The angel thereupon took him by the hair of the head and placed him in the lions' den, where he bade Daniel eat of the food provided for him, and, immediately afterwards, he was conveyed by the Angel back to his own land. The story is an interesting indication of the fact that he lived in the Chaldean epoch, and indeed he is the only prophet of that period. He probably wrote in the reign of Jehoiachim, and towards the commencement of the Babylonian captivity, B.C. 586. Although his book contains few actual predictions of the far future, and no Messianic prophecy unless iii. 13 be one, he is nevertheless a very great prophet, and as a moral seer and deep theologian has few equals among the Minor Prophets. He had to deal with a tremendous problem—the sudden dawn of the Chaldean power—which led him into earnest speculation as to God's

moral government of the world. He was led, as we shall see, to find the solution of his difficulties in the fact, which no one before him had so clearly expressed, that "wrongdoing is self-destruction even in prosperity, while there is joy and peace in righteousness even amid misfortune and misery." Unlike his predecessors he has no denunciations against the crimes or idolatry of his people, unless some critics are right in the uncertain conclusion that the four first verses refer to Judah. If however this be the case, the wrongdoing complained of seems to have been mainly due to external tyranny. The problem of holiness in suffering was presented to him under a new aspect. Job and some of the Psalmists had been deeply perplexed by it, but only as regards the lives of individuals. They solved it mainly by the consideration that the condition was exceptional, and that though the wicked might for a time flourish like a green bay tree, yet he was soon cut down.

In Job we find the additional suggestion that even the holiest men are not entirely guiltless before God. The earlier sacred writers did not touch on the later solution of the problem by pointing to the life beyond the grave.

But Habakkuk's difficulty was far more serious, for he saw before him a righteous and suffering *nation* oppressed by a godless and wicked people; and it was amazing to him that God should tolerate so apparent an anomaly. The difficulty was all the greater because there did not seem to be any prospect whatever of any immediate alleviation. Under these circumstances Habakkuk "speaks to God for Israel rather than as do the other prophets to Israel from God." The answer which he receives from God to these problems is :

I. That God is the Lord and that judgment will fall at last on the wicked : and

II. That earthly prosperity has nothing to do with the deepest realities of life.

This truth is expressed in God's answer to the prophet's appeal, which is the most memorable verse in his prophecy.

"Behold his soul (the soul of the Chaldean) is puffed up, it is not upright in him. But the righteous shall live by his faithfulness."

The importance of this utterance is shown by the fact that it is three times quoted in the New Testament (Rom. i. 17; Gal. iii. 11; Heb. x. 38), and that, in the form "The just shall live by faith," it is the main substance of St. Paul's theology, namely, "justification by faith." Thus Habakkuk enunciated a truth which is one of the most spiritual links between the Old and New Dispensations, and, like all the greatest of the prophets, he was a teacher of spiritual righteousness as definitely transcending ceremonial observances. In the midst of an oppressed and suffering nation, crushed by cruel and insolent tyranny, he is still the prophet of faith.

His "oracle" falls into three main divisions.

I. The agonizing cry, followed by God's terrible announcement of the rise of the Chaldeans, and the troubled inquiry of the prophet.

II. God's answer. The prophet will ascend his watch tower to hear what God will answer. The answer came mainly in the great verse which we have quoted, and which amounts to the declaration that righteousness does not only contain the *promise* of life, but that it *is* life. The remainder of the chapter consists of five strophes each consisting of three verses, in which the nations rise and taunt the Chaldeans with their rapacity, their selfishness, their haughty ambition, their cruel drunkenness and their vain idolatry.

III. The third chapter is one of the most magnificent in the Bible. It is called "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet upon Shigionoth" which might be translated "in dithyrambics," or "to the music of ecstasy." It is mainly

occupied with an exultant hymn of praise which dwells upon God's mighty deliverances of His people in times past ; and, in consequence, despite the present distress and affliction the prophet triumphantly concludes :

In Jehovah will I rejoice,
I will be glad in the God of my salvation.
Jehovah, the Lord, is my strength ;
He maketh my feet like hinds' feet,
And maketh me walk upon the heights.

Thus the prophet's anguish and distress end in words of unquenchable hope.

VII. OBADIAH.

The name of Obadiah means "servant of Jehovah." It was a common name, but the prophet (of whom nothing is known) cannot be identified with the other Obadiah mentioned in the Scriptures. His book is the smallest in the Old Testament and may be summed up in the words "*The doom of Edom.*" It is evident that he wrote after the destruction of the northern kingdom, and shortly after the final invasion of Nebuchadnezzar. This seems clear from verse 20: "The captivity of this host of the children of Israel which the Canaanites have carried captive even unto Zarephath, and the captivity of Jerusalem which is in Sepharad shall possess the cities of the south." The expression "this host" seems to show that Obadiah may have been one of the inhabitants of Judah who fled into Phœnicia before the Babylonish invaders. Sepharad may be a name for Sardis ; and if so, Obadiah probably wrote about B.C. 586, shortly after the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

When Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem the Edomites seemed to have behaved with abominable insolence and cruelty. They intercepted the fugitives who tried to escape down the Jordan valley, and indulged in heartless and

drunken demonstrations even on the hill of the Temple. Their conduct on this occasion showed so wicked a form of hatred and malignity that it excited the most passionate indignation of the Jewish Psalmists and Prophets, who frequently called upon God to avenge it. (Lam. iv. 21, 22; Ezek. xxxv. 1-15; Isa. lxiii. 1-6; Ps. cxxxvii. 7; Esdr. iv. 45-56.) Even "by the waters of Babylon" the weeping captives of Judah remembered bitterly how, while the Babylonians were destroying Jerusalem and the Temple, the envious Edomites exultantly shouted "Down with it! Down with it! even to the ground."

The prophecy falls into two sections:

I. The first deals with the guilt and punishment of Edom, though she thinks herself to be so secure amid the rocky fastnesses of Petra.

II. The promise of restoration to Israel after Edom has perished at the hands of the heathen, and of the Jews.

The prophecy of Edom's ruin was amply fulfilled. In B.C. 312 we find the Nabatheans in possession of Edom; in B.C. 166 Judas Maccabæus drove them from Southern Palestine; in B.C. 135 John Hyrcanus reduced them to entire subjection to the Jews; and in B.C. 66 Simon of Gerasa laid Idumea waste with fire and sword.

VIII. HAGGAI.

Haggai was one of the earliest of the post-exilic Prophets, all of whom—though they had many important truths to enunciate—fall incomparably below the impassioned fervour and splendid poetry of their greater predecessors. This was due to the depressed and humble position to which the Jewish nation had sunk. The Ten Tribes had finally disappeared, and Judah was no longer an independent people under its own king, but was reduced mainly to scattered communities of exiles, of whom those who had returned to their own land formed one of the pettiest satrapies of the

Persian empire. Israel was in fact "no longer a kingdom, but a colony, and a church," under Zerubbabel the governor, and Jeshua the high priest. They laid the foundations of the Temple amid mingled sounds of joy and weeping; but when they had rejected the overtures of the Samaritans, two obscure magnates, Rehum and Shimshai, stirred up the jealousy of the Persians against them, and succeeded in hindering the progress of the house of God. Haggai and Zechariah aroused the Jews from this lethargy, and when Tatnai and Setharbosnai appealed to Darius on the subject, the original decree of Cyrus was found and Darius approved of the endeavours of the Jews. The whole main message of Haggai may be compressed into the words "Build the Temple." Nothing is known of him personally. His name means "the Festival," probably because he was born on some Jewish feast. His prophecies were all delivered in the sixth, seventh and ninth months of the year B.C. 520, as those of Zechariah were mainly spoken in the eighth and eleventh months of the same year.

Haggai's prophecy, which is prosaic and full of often repeated formulae, falls into four divisions. He has been called "the most matter-of-fact of all the prophets," and is full of repetitions. His first discourse (i. 1-11) turns on the one exhortation "Arise and build." It was addressed to Zerubbabel and Jeshua and reproaches the people with more attention to their own ceiled houses than to the Temple, of which the prophet puts into God's mouth the words, "I will take pleasure in it, and will be glorified." In the Hebrew word for "I will be glorified," the final *h* (ה), is omitted, and as ה stands for "5" the Jews said that five things were wanting in the new Temple—namely, I. The Ark and Mercy-seat; II. The Shechinah, or Cloud of Glory; III. The fire that descended from heaven; IV. The Urim and Thummim; and V. The spirit of prophecy. In this message Haggai declares that the prevalent drought and

poverty were a punishment for the neglect to build the Temple.

2. The second discourse (ii. 1-9) is mainly full of *comfort and promise*, and contains the remarkable prophecy that the "latter glory of this house shall be greater than the glory of the former," since the "desire of all nations shall come" into it. The prophecy is usually interpreted of Christ's visit to the Temple, but in the Hebrew the abstract word "*the desire*" means "*the desirable things* of all nations"; and the promise was fulfilled by the splendid gifts bestowed on the Temple by Darius, Artaxerxes, Herod, and other princes.

3. The third discourse, two months later, is a promise that plenty shall reward the fulfilment of duty, the promised blessing to begin "from this day." The meaning of the two Halachoth, or ceremonial rules, about which he asks the priests, is that iniquity or uncleanness is more diffusive than holiness.

4. The fourth discourse is a special promise to Zerubbabel that God will make him as a signet on His right hand. This was fulfilled in the fact that "the sure mercies of David" were fully granted in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was a direct descendant of Zerubbabel.

Prosaic as Haggai's prophecy may seem to be, it yet teaches the three great moral truths, (I.) That faithfulness is directly connected with national prosperity; (II.) That discouragement is no excuse for neglect; and (III.) that when a good work has to be done, the time to do it is *now*.

IX. ZECHARIAH.

Zechariah was a younger contemporary of Haggai, and urged, though under very different forms, the same message. We know no more of him than that he was "the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo," and therefore belonged to a

priestly house. He was probably a young man when he wrote, and had recently returned from exile.

What we call "*the book of Zechariah*" contains the prophecies of three different prophets, of whom the two placed last wrote long before the prophet Zechariah. The first of these anonymous prophets wrote chapters ix. to xi., and the second wrote chapters xii. to xiv. The first eight chapters only are by the contemporary of Haggai.

The first six chapters of the genuine Zechariah consist of an address and seven visions. He begins with an exhortation to repentance (i. 1-6), and then follow the visions :

I. (i. 7-17.) *The Angel Riders*, implying that God will ultimately punish all heathen adversaries.

II. *The four horns and the four smiths*, which also implies the approaching judgment of the heathen.

III. (ii. 1-13.) *The Restoration of Jerusalem*.

IV. *The Restoration of the Priesthood and the Prophecy of the Branch*, in which Jeshua is disrobed of his "filthy garments" and clothed in festal apparel.

V. *The Golden Candelabrum*. In this vision is prophesied the future glory of the Temple, and the share in that glory which belongs to Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the anointed prince and the anointed priest.

VI. The sixth vision is a double one ; first, *of a flying roll* (v. 1-4)—or perhaps the true reading should be *the flying sickle*, implying that all thieves and false swearers should be cut off. The second part (v. 5-11) is of *a flying ephah*, implying dishonest gain in which at last is placed a woman, the symbol of wickedness, over whom the ephah is closed by a plate of lead, and she is carried away to Babylon. This is the fulfilment of the promise, "I will remove the iniquity of the land in one day."

VII. The seventh vision of *the Four Chariots* (vi. 1-8) indicates God's judgments upon heathen nations.

At the close of these visions we have another, of *the*

crowning of the High Priest (vi. 9-15). The last two chapters (vii., viii.) turn on a question about fasting. Many of the Jews at this time kept four fasts, which commemorated four disastrous days at the beginning of the captivity. The people of Bethel send two messengers to the prophet to ask whether these fasts should still be kept. The answer of Zechariah, as of nearly all the prophets, implies the eternal nullity of ceremonialism as compared with moral duties. The prophet gives them no direct answer about these fasts, but bids them to be true and kind and faithful, and then their fasts should become joy and gladness and cheerful feasts; until ten men of all nations should, in envy and admiration, take hold of the skirt of a Jew and say, "We will go with you for we have heard that God is with you." Thus appropriately ends the authentic treatise of Zechariah, the grandson of Iddo.

X. AN ANONYMOUS PROPHET ("Zechariah" ix.-xi.).

These chapters are undoubtedly the work of a different prophet from the Zechariah who wrote the first eight chapters. They belong to an epoch previous to the fall of the northern kingdom. Their style is different; their linguistic peculiarities, their recurrent phrases, their historical standpoint, their whole circle of thought is different. There is no trace of angelology; there are no visions; they allude to political and national circumstances which have no relation to those which existed in the days of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. There is no allusion to Babylon, but the enemies contemplated are Syrians, Phœnicians, Philistines, Assyria and Egypt. The Temple of Jerusalem is still standing (xi. 13); the Northern Kingdom is still powerful (ix. 10-13, x. 6, 7 and xi. 14). The chapters therefore must certainly have been written, not by Zechariah, but by some younger contemporary of Hosea. The days alluded to are those of Shallum, Menahem, and the anarchy which suc-

ceeded the death of Jeroboam II. How these chapters came to be attached to the prophecy of Zechariah is unknown; but some suppose that they may have been written by the Zechariah mentioned in Isaiah viii. 2. They are much more powerful than the preceding chapters. They fall as usual into three main divisions:

1. The triumph of Zion over her enemies, such as Damascus, Tyre, Askelon, Gaza, Ashdod and Ekron (ix. 1-8). The advent is then prophesied of the Holy King of Sion (ix. 9-11), who is to come lowly and riding upon an ass, a prophecy which is quoted by St. Matthew of the coming of Christ (Matt. xxi. 5). There then follows a splendid strophe promising deliverance and glory to Israel.

2. The second division dwells on the exaltation of Israel and Judah, though it is mingled with memories of judgment.

3. The third division dwells on apostasy, and judgment which is to be inflicted by some terrible invasion from the north. The prophet is bidden to assume the duties of a shepherd over the people, and he makes two staves, one of which he calls "graciousness," to imply peace with the surrounding countries; and the other he calls 'union,' because he wishes to unite Judah and Israel. Three other shepherds, or kings, have preceded him and been cut off, but since the people are disobedient and ungrateful, he breaks his staff "graciousness," and demands some reward for his labours. They scornfully offer him thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave. The typical character of this narrative is brought out by St. Matthew (xxvii. 10), who applies it to the betrayal of our Lord by Judas. The prophet then breaks his other staff, "union," and contemptuously casts the thirty pieces of silver either "to the potter," or (as in the Syriac) to the Temple treasury. In this the unknown prophet again becomes a type of the Good Shepherd whom Judas sold (Matt. xxvii. 9; Mark xii. 41).

The prophecy is a very powerful one, but some of the historical allusions are uncertain.

XI. ANOTHER ANONYMOUS PROPHET

(“Zechariah” xii.–xiv.).

These chapters were written under the pressure of some impending calamity, in which there is reason to fear that Judah had taken part in the siege of Jerusalem by its enemies (xiv. 14, R.V.).

Here again we have three divisions :

1. *The great deliverance and the better age* (xii. 1 to xiii. 9), which tells of God’s judgments on the heathen (xii. 1–9), of the repentance of Jerusalem (xii. 9–14), and of the purification of a repentant remnant from guilt and falsity. In this division several passages are applied by the Evangelists to Christ. One is, “They shall look on him (or ‘me’) whom they pierced,” of which the original reference is uncertain, though it may apply to the traditional murder of Isaiah by Manasseh, or of Urijah by Jehoiakim.

2. The second part of the prophecy (xiv.) deals first with judgment on national transgressions, and then with the final glory of the Messianic kingdom.

XII. JOEL.

All modern critics, with scarcely an exception, have come to the conclusion that Joel was a prophet of the post-exilic period, since he is entirely silent on the wickedness of Judah and Israel, and makes no allusion to the use of High Places and to other idolatrous aberrations denounced by the earlier Prophets. Nothing whatever is known of Joel except that he was the son of Pethuel, who is equally unknown. He borrows largely from the earlier Prophets. He makes no mention of kings or princes, and seems to allude to the Babylonish captivity in iii. 1, where he

speaks of Israel as having been "scattered among the nations." Many of his allusions to worship, as well as his complete silence about the northern tribes, his familiarity with previous writers, his allusions to Levitic worship and the narrowness of his political horizon all seem to show that he wrote during, or after, the days of Ezra.

His prophecy falls mainly into two short divisions :

I. The day of the Lord as indicated by a fearful plague of locusts, which is described at length.

He then alludes to a penitent assembly of the nation which had been followed by abundant rain and renewed prosperity (ii. 18, 19).

II. Jehovah promises deliverance (ii. 19-27), and we have then a description of the outpouring of the Spirit, the judgment of the heathen, and the blessings bestowed on Judah. The prophecy is not free from difficult allusions into which we cannot enter, but it dwells on the elements of hope and fear, and inculcates the lessons which lie at the basis of all moral and religious teaching, namely, the certain reward of the righteous, and the certain punishment of the wicked. His prophecy of the outpouring of God's spirit upon all flesh is alluded to both by St. Peter (Acts ii. 16-21) and by St. Paul (Rom. x. 13).

XIII. JONAH.

The book of Jonah differs entirely from all the other Minor Prophets. The Jonah whose fortunes are described is the son of Amittai, who lived in the reign of Jeroboam II. in the eighth century before Christ. But in this book he is always spoken of in the third person, and critics are now almost unanimous in the view that the book was written after the Exile. Among other proofs of this the language contains a number of Aramaic forms, and Nineveh is spoken of in the past tense as a city which no longer existed.

There is scarcely a single living scholar who regards the

story as having been intended to be taken literally. There is not the faintest trace, either in sacred or profane literature, of the events narrated in this book. It is now universally regarded as a late but interesting specimen of the Jewish Midrash or Haggada, that is, a story not founded on actual events, but a moral and spiritual allegory—thus belonging to the same phase of literature as the books of Job, Daniel, and Esther. The only argument of the least validity urged against this view is the allusion ascribed to our Lord in Matthew xii. 39, 40, where we find the words, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the fish's belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." There is reason to doubt whether this verse is not a later addition to the original; since "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt. xvi. 4; Luke xi. 29) refers not to the sea monster, but to the repentance of the Ninevites at Jonah's preaching. Even, however, if this view be rejected, "it does not necessarily follow," says the late Dean Plumptre, "that this use of the history as a prophetic symbol of the Resurrection requires us to accept it in the very letter of its details. It was enough for the purposes of the illustration that it was familiar and generally accepted."

The fact, however, that the book is a moral allegory and not a narrative of actual events does not in the least detract from the value of the many profound lessons which it teaches. There is a contrast throughout between the littleness of man and the almighty mercy of God; between the dark sinister selfishness, intolerance, and personal unworthiness of the prophet who tries to escape from the commands of God, and cares more for the loss of comfort involved in the withering of his gourd than he does for the release from peril of the vast population of Nineveh—and the large mercy of the Almighty, who gently rebukes his fierce and selfish religionism.

Thus the book of Jonah is full of great lessons of toleration, of pity, of the impossibility of flying from God, of the merciful deliverances of God, of the just retributions of God, of the infinite love of God, of man's little hatred shamed into fatuity, dwarfed into insignificance by God's abounding tenderness. But the main lesson of the book is the rebuke which it involves of the narrow and hateful particularism of those Jews who thought that God cared only for them, while He was utterly indifferent to the destruction of all the nations of heathendom. The main lesson of the book is therefore that which is found in the book of Wisdom: "O God, the whole world is as a drop of morning dew, but Thou hast mercy upon all . . . for Thou lovest all things that are, and abhorrest nothing that Thou hast made. . . . But Thou sparest all . . . for they are Thine, O Lord, Thou lover of souls."

XIV. MALACHI.

Malachi was certainly the last of the Prophets. He wrote fully sixty years or more after Haggai and Zechariah. We know nothing of him, and are not even certain of his name, for the word Malachi means "My Messenger, or My Angel," and the first verse is translated in the Septuagint: "The oracle of the Word of the Lord to Israel, by the hand of His angel!" and in 2 Esdras i. 39, we find the words "Malachi, who is called also an angel of the Lord." In Malachi iii. 1 the name occurs in the words, "Behold, I send you *My Messenger*." He has been called "the Seal" because his book closes the canon of the Old Testament. It is almost certain that he wrote during the twelve years' absence of Nehemiah at the court of Artaxerxes, after his first visit to Jerusalem. During this period many evils rose to a head, the worst of which was that sad and fatal degeneracy of the priesthood which Malachi so strenuously denounces.

After the brief introduction on the love of God for Judah (i. 2-5) the book falls into three sections :

- I. Denunciation of the sins of the priests (i. 6-ii. 9).
- II. Denunciation of the sins of the people (ii. 10-iii. 15).
- III. Prophecy of the Day of the Lord, and its fore-runner.

1. *Sins of the Priests.* These sins consist chiefly in the ingratitude of the Priests for the love of God. This was shown by their offerings of polluted bread, and of blind, sick, and lame victims for sacrifice upon God's altar, such as even their earthly governor would refuse with indignation. They treated God's worship as a weariness and a thing to be despised, and unless they repented Malachi threatens them that God would send His curse upon them. He represents their crime as the more heinous because at this very time the heathen feared and honoured God's name and offered to Him incense and a pure offering—the acceptable sacrifices of prayer and love. What was needed by the priests was not only ceremonial exactitude, but, far more than this, moral faithfulness.

2. *The Sins of the People* (ii. 10 ; iii. 15.) The chief sin which the prophet denounces is the marriages with the heathen women ; but he adds, in an obscure passage, that, in consequence of the misdoings of the people, women came weeping and wailing to the altar of Jehovah, and covered it with their tears. He also severely denounces the frequency of divorce—a thing which, he says, God hates. (ii. 13-16.)

He next dwells on their insolent defiance, which God would certainly judge ; for he would be a "swift" witness against the sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, oppressors, and insolent. (ii. 17-iii. 6). He proceeds to deal with further warnings, and tells them that their locust-eaten harvests and blighted vineyards are a punishment for their sins ; but that if they would return to their duty and repent of

their iniquities, God would open for them the windows of heaven, and all nations should call them happy. (iii. 7-12.)

He further rebukes them for their querulous distrust because God did not reward their outward humiliation and small Levitic scrupulosities (iii. 13-15), but he thankfully acknowledges that there is a pious remnant among them who should hereafter be as jewels in God's treasure house. (iii. 16-18.)

3. *The Day of the Lord.* He concludes with admonition and blessing, speaking of the Day of the Lord in which the wicked should be consumed, but the holy should shine under the healing wings of the Sun of Righteousness. Before the great and dreadful Day of the Lord He would send them Elijah the Prophet. This promise, as our Lord explained, was fulfilled in the mission of John the forerunner of the promised Messiah.

It is regarded as ominous that the last word of the last prophet of the Old Testament is "curse." The word (cherem) should however be rendered rather "ban" than "curse," and this ban has certainly fallen upon Palestine for ages. The Jews, however, to avert the evil omen, always read after the last verse of Malachi the verse which immediately precedes it.

They adopt a similar method to mitigate the stern conclusions of the books of Isaiah, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes.

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